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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 002554

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SUBJECT: OPPOSITION GROUP LOOKING MORE LIKE A PARTY, STILL

REFUSES TO ENGAGE WITH RULING PARTY

REF: ADDIS 2511

Classified By: Classified by CDA Roger A. Meece for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Forum for Democratic Dialogue (Forum) continues to try to transform itself from a collection of eight separate parties into a coherent whole. In a series of recent meetings with USG officials and the broader international diplomatic community, however, Forum representatives steadfastly refused to engage in talks with the ruling party (EPRDF) aimed at laying the groundwork for free and fair Parliamentary elections in 2010 unless non-Forum, non-EPRDF parties were excluded. Forum representatives rebutted newly coordinated international pressure encouraging Forum engagement with other parties by insisting that multilateral talks would not further democratic transparency but would rather allow the ruling party to profit from political gimmickry. They added that negotiations with the EPRDF are largely futile in any event. Forum representatives contended that the Forum's "Manifesto" or platform differs from EPRDF in several areas with the Forum advocating: economic liberalization with increased foreign direct investment, modernization of agriculture, and "negotiations" with Eritrea on port access and the border. Forum representatives readily admit their platform reflects its members' least-common-denominator approach to negotiations and believe their common message will be sharpened during the campaign. End Summary.

USG/EPG Encourages Forum To Seize Opportunity For Engagement

¶2. (SBU) On October 22, the Ethiopian Partners Group (EPG) Democracy Committee met with representatives of the Forum for Democratic Dialogue (Forum) to discuss the Forum's engagement (or lack thereof) in interparty talks. EPG representatives included ambassadors from the U.S., Canada, Germany, Norway, and Spain and the British Political Counselor. Working off of a core script drafted by the U.S., UK, Germany, and Norway in an effort to synchronize the positions of EPG members, representatives encouraged the Forum to engage with the EPRDF in interparty talks, and stressed that failure to engage would be viewed by the international community as a missed opportunity to at least challenge EPRDF commitment to free and fair elections. Other recent meetings had visiting AF/E office director, DCM, P/E Counselor, Deputy P/E Counselor, and poloffs hosting various permutations of Forum representatives including Chair Merera Gudina (Oromo People's Congress), Platform Committee Chair Beyene Petros (United Ethiopian Democratic Forces), Spokesman Gebru Asrat (Arena

Tigray), and Elections Committee Chair Gezachew Shiferaw (Unity for Democracy and Justice). The following is a composite of those conversations.

Forum: Holding Out for Bilateral Discussions with EPRDF  
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¶3. (C) The Forum representatives flatly told the EPG they are willing to engage with the EPRDF only on a bilateral basis, not multilaterally with other opposition parties as the EPRDF is insisting. The issues the Forum wishes to discuss alone with the EPRDF include respect for human rights of political party members, ability to freely open offices, freedom of assembly, respect for the rule of law, reasonable access to the media, and recruitment of officials for the National Electoral Board of Ethiopia (NEBE), among others. According to Beyene Petros, these issues are more appropriate for bilateral Forum-EPRDF discussion in that the ruling party would "rally one party against another" and "push them out of the negotiation table" in any multilateral context. Beyene cited as an example multiparty talks held during the 2005 elections, which he called "a futile exercise" in which the ruling party orchestrated interminable debates that engendered extreme frustration and confusion among opposition parties. Merera Gudina said that as a result of this experience, opposition leaders are "doubting Thomases" and distrustful of the ruling party. Beyene said the Forum does not see the specter of multiparty talks as an opportunity but rather as a political gimmick by which the EPRDF will avoid election reform even as it makes a virtue of ostensible inclusiveness. Later in the discussion, several Forum leaders

ADDIS ABAB 00002554 002 OF 003

asserted that past experience has led them to conclude that it is all but impossible to negotiate in good faith with the EPRDF and the latter never lives up to its commitments.

¶4. (SBU) At the same meeting, in response to a question regarding the Forum's new leadership structure, current Forum Chair Merera Gudina noted that his tenure is for four months, but is not "renewable." Instead, leadership will rotate among the eight constituent groups, each with a four month term. He described the Chairman position as being a "first among equals" in a "collective leadership" arrangement, with decisions to be taken by consensus.

¶5. (C) Beyene and Gizachew, in separate private conversations, saw ominous possibilities if Ethiopia failed to stage free and fair elections next year. Beyene said an increasing narrowing of political space by the government "brings the possibility of armed struggle into the conversation." Gizachew said that if the elections were not free and fair, the whole Horn of Africa could fall into crisis. He said that people were already using armed struggle in Oromo, Ogaden and Amhara regions of Ethiopia to call for political change and an end to a system of patrimony that made jobs realistically available only to EPRDF partisans. Gizachew said he sees no hope of reputable elections and confided that he privately advocates within the Forum for an immediate announcement of a total boycott of the elections, adding that he stays in the group only because his belief in consensus is stronger than his private support for a boycott.

The "Manifesto": the Opposition Party Platform  
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¶6. (C) Beyene Petros was proud of the culmination of one and a half years of work that has resulted in the Forum's 65-page "Manifesto," currently undergoing embassy translation. He described it as a platform which does not merely oppose the ruling party's policies, but which presents the opposition's proposed way forward in detail. He gave several examples of how the Forum's party platform was distinct from current

EPRDF ruling party policies:

- **Federalism:** The Forum would form a national unity government of a transitional nature that would remain in power for a five-year period and facilitate a national dialogue on the future structure of Ethiopia, considering possibilities beyond the EPRDF concept of ethnic federalism. During this period it would invite other parties to take part in Parliament. This would extend to "parties" such as the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF).

- **Land Ownership:** In place of the existing State control of all land, the Forum would allow enhanced private control short of full ownership. Beyene said that five of the Forum's eight constituent parties favored legalizing full private ownership of land (including his own UEDF), but the three others were acting as a brake on this policy.

- **Rule of Law:** The Forum favors creation of an independent prosecutor general's office that would answer directly to the Parliament instead of to the Ministry of Justice. Beyene said he thought this would alleviate the problem of Habeus Corpus issues and people being held incommunicado for long periods of time. He said the Forum would implement full depoliticizing of the armed forces and police.

- **Economics:** Beyene said the Forum would seek greatly increased foreign direct investment and would, in particular, systematically liberalize the telecommunications sector. He said the Forum would abandon the EPRDF's policy of agriculture-led development in favor of agricultural modernization and the privatization of markets and would retain independent professionals to analyze quantitatively Ethiopia's economic performance.

- **Foreign Relations:** The Forum believes Ethiopia should negotiate directly with Eritrea for access to the sea and should renegotiate the Algiers Agreement that led to the disputed delimitation of the Ethiopia-Eritrea border.

ADDIS ABAB 00002554 003 OF 003

#### TPLF-Owned Businesses -- An Illegal "Parallel Economy"

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17. (C) Beyene raised the issue of TPLF-owned businesses. He stated that the law says no political party may own an enterprise, yet the ruling party has billions of dollars of assets in textiles, cement, pharmaceuticals, vehicle assembly and fertilizer plants. Beyene asserted the assets from these enterprises might be worth more than the total amount of State assets. He expressed "disappointment" in foreign donors for accepting these illegal "parallel economies" in Ethiopia that "distort the whole economic life of the country."

18. (C) Comment: The series of group and individual meetings post has had with Forum members in the past few weeks reveal an evolution of the organizational structure of the group. The General Assembly, the Committee Meetings to prepare work plans (reftel) and even the meetings held around the subject of the interparty talks have allowed the group to better form a unified voice. Although the Forum has yet to really come together and continues to frustrate the U.S. and most of the international community with its refusal to engage in meaningful debate with the EPRDF and other opposition groups, we see some, albeit limited progress. We are convinced certain individual Forum members, especially Beyene, are just as frustrated as we are with the slow pace of party-building and are determined and capable of accelerating it. It is worth noting that not all Forum policy development may be positive. The Forum's emerging policy towards Eritrea, in particular, calls for a dangerously provocative tearing up of the Algiers Agreement and some variety of Ethiopian right to

the port of Asab. End Comment.

19. (SBU) Biographic Note: Dr. Beyene Petros is currently the First Vice Chairman of the United Ethiopian Democratic Front (UEDF) and Chairman of the Ethiopian Social Democratic Federalist Party (ESDFP). He was born on March 11, 1950 in Ethiopia's Southern region of Hamburse. He is the son of a policeman of Hadiya ethnic origin. He graduated in 1973 with a B.S. degree from Addis Ababa University. He obtained a Master's degree in Zoology in 1977 at the University of Wisconsin and PhD from Tulane University in 1986. He became an Assistant Professor at Addis Ababa University in 1986, an Associate professor in 1996 and a Full Professor of Biological Sciences in the Department of Biology in 2006. He worked as Vice Minister of Education in the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) from 1991-1993. It is rumored that he left the government because he was not named Minister of Education when the post became vacant in 1993. He was Chairman of the Southern Ethiopia People's Democratic Coalition and Chairman of the opposition, Council of Alternative Forces for Peace and Democracy in Ethiopia (CAFPDE), which was one of the few opposition parties to participate in the 2000 elections. With four seats in the House of People's Representatives, Beyene's party was the largest single opposition party in Parliament from 2000-2005.

Dr. Beyene was re-elected in the May 2005 national elections representing Badowacho Wereda in the Southern Region. Currently he chairs the domestic United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF). UEDF split into domestic and Diaspora UEDF following the May 2005 elections because the domestic UEDF led by Professor Beyene joined the parliament. Those UEDF members who are opposed to joining the parliament distanced themselves from the domestic UEDF in October 2005.

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